**SCMP Article**

**You don't have to wear a suit to be a success**

There was a time, some 50 years ago, when only 1 per cent of young Hong Kong people could go to university here. A few others who could afford it would study for degrees overseas. For the vast majority of people, college was an unattainable dream.

By the mid-2000s, the figure had hit 45 per cent. Just a few years earlier, then chief executive Tung Chee-hwa set a target of 60 per cent of young people receiving tertiary education.

However, the term “tertiary education” covers a wide range of courses.

Expectations, ambition and a sense of growing competition have led young people – and their parents – to believe that they must have a full university degree. Yet only half of qualified high-school graduates get a subsidised place on a full degree course at a local university, which is equivalent to around one in five school-leavers.

Many students go to college overseas, some to selective or prestigious institutions, some to lesser-known schools. And there has been a huge increase in the number of young people studying locally at their own expense for associate degrees and diplomas. Some are attracted to courses that point to careers in particular sectors like business and finance.

The result is bound to be frustration for some of these students later on. They want and expect jobs in what they think are high-paying and high-status positions. As a Central Policy Unit study on the “post-80s generation” found, the number of opportunities in management and the professions has in fact been growing. The problem is that the number of college graduates is growing faster.

Inevitably, many go into junior clerical or sales jobs, and they and their parents probably feel disappointed. This must add to the overall feeling in Hong Kong of inequality and declining social mobility.

As educational opportunities have expanded, we seem to have seen a growing bias against the option of learning a trade. The strange thing is that the pay for many skilled jobs in construction, hospitality and the clothing industry compares favourably with that in entry-level positions in local banks or big conglomerates.

Hong Kong offers a wide range of technical and vocational training options to prepare young people for such skilled work. Yet it seems everyone wants to wear a suit and work in an office in Central.

Speaking as someone who wears a suit and works in an office in Central, I can say that this sort of life is not really very glamorous. A small number of investment banking jobs offer huge salaries – plus extreme stress. Many other jobs in financial services come with sales quotas and are very much focused on marketing. It is no secret that legal and accounting work is not always very exciting.

However, there is clearly prestige attached to financial and professional careers. Our media portray businessmen as stars and quote them as if they are gurus. In advertising, the boardroom and business-class travel are images of success. Within schools and families, there is clearly a bias in favour of particular academic and educational qualifications.

This is not unique to Hong Kong. Canadian officials are worried that young people want humanities degrees when the big employment opportunities are for people like electricians. The Singapore media recently blamed the high status of business as a career for a shortage of mass transit engineers.

Maybe we should look at it the other way around: the real bias is a negative one – against certain types of training and trade. The media, parents and society in general have become so focused on particular narrow forms of achievement that anything else is seen as failure.

A task force on vocational education in Hong Kong found that much of the problem comes down to image and prejudice. A big contrast is with Germany, where market-driven and well-funded apprenticeships are a first choice, not a second one, for many smart young people. In Germany, a good mechanic has as much pride and respect as a white-collar worker.

We need to get the message across: skills in creating and working with actual things are a sign of success.